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STUDYING COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICTS)

I like to refer to myself as a 'media anthropologist' – it makes reference to my training (in anthropology) and the subject matter of my research (media). But unlike others on this panel I have never worked in an anthropology department but always in media and cultural studies and journalism departments. That's 10 years of research in such settings.

Much of my current work has an 'applications' component – that may be a web based application that allows for the development of a network of young content creators in Queensland (see www.sticky.net.au) as part of the Youth Internet Radio Network research project, or, a project development and monitoring and evaluation methodology for ICT for development initiatives (ethnographic action research – discussed below).

So, am I, in practice, an anthropologist? And, does it matter? Is it a sign of strength or weakness to be enriched or diluted by a range of disciplinary influences? What is it from anthropology that I bring to my current work? I will briefly describe some of the key aspects of my work and return to these questions at the end of this paper.

In the media and cultural studies settings in which I have worked as a researcher it has proved useful to be able to indicate a disciplinary origin – social anthropology - that is generally seen as adding to rather than opposing or challenging those disciplines.

So what is it that my training has contributed to my studies of media? I want to talk very briefly about three things. Two of them are, I think, directly related to my training – they are the **ethnographic** approach that I take and my attempts to be **holistic**. The third thing I want to discuss is what I call **application and making media**. This I think is a consequence of the particular type of 'media anthropology' (if indeed that is what it is) that is

located in the practice, not just the study, of development communications. It is also perhaps a consequence of undergraduate time spent reading (and being excited by) the work of people like Worth and Adair.

1. Ethnographic

Firstly, and unsurprisingly, my research is ethnographic in approach. While ethnography is just one methodological approach among many that media and communications scholars might adopt, for anthropologists it is the obvious and inalienable approach. For me long term immersion is a key principle of an ethnographic approach and yet in all my practices of anthropological and/or ethnographic research this has not been practiced in a conventional (traditional?) way.

In my earlier studies of the domestic consumption of radio sound as a part of the material culture of the home, straightforward participant observation of radio listening was not an option, so I developed an approach where I sought to develop relationships with those I studied, unhappy to rely on in-depth interviews alone. I used a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, group discussions, observation, sound mapping and media use diary keeping. What I ended up writing about was the contemporary quest for affective equilibrium, or emotional balance, and the role of media consumption in this. Studying an ‘intimate’ yet pervasive medium revealed an intimate yet pervasive aspect of everyday life that an ethnographic approach seemed well suited to uncover.

My current work is a further (per)version of ethnography, and one that is causing me to consider emic and etic distinctions in (I think) a really fascinating way. Much of my recent work has been concerned with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and development. The role that ICTs might play in poverty reduction has been a central focus. How poverty is understood influences how it is measured, and what is measured. These measurements are reflected in policies that impact on people’s lives. This is an area of work that is more familiar with terms such as indicators and impact assessment than ethnography. But there is a growing interest in

communication for social change (see www.communicationforsocialchange.org) which insists that ‘Social Change can be defined as: a positive change in peoples’ lives – as they themselves define such change’ (Parks 2005, p.3). The difficulty of setting and measuring indicators of social change that are non material can be addressed if one takes an ethnographic approach. Poverty is not simply about economic insecurity, although that of course is important. Participatory approaches to poverty for example highlight the non-material which includes ‘lack of voice, shame and stigma; powerlessness; denial of rights and diminished citizenship’ (Lister 2004, p.7). - the way poor people are talked about and treated by those around them, those in positions of power, influential bodies and the media.

How might we consider the role of ICTs in poverty reduction, where it is recognised that deprivation is multi-dimensional and includes not only levels of poverty but also social relations, levels of vulnerability, access to information and resources and the ability to play an active role in society and have a voice? How can donor funded communication for development initiatives work to reduce poverty?

To not only try and answer these questions, but improve ICT interventions on the ground, I developed ethnographic action research (EAR) with Don Slater at the London School of Economics. It starts from the understanding that for ICT initiatives (like Community Multimedia Centres or Telecentres) to use ICTs for effective social change they need to develop their capacity to understand the communities they are trying to reach, and to be able to monitor and evaluate their work. EAR is a combination of ethnographic methods (including PO and in-depth interviews), participatory methods (such as mapping exercises), and action research. While I don’t have time to go into it in detail here, the important thing to note is that I train people within these ICT centres (in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Indonesia) to use EAR to help them better develop their centres and understand how they are impacting on the communities they are working with. There is a network of these centres, and local EAR researchers. As well, there are researchers at QUT and University of Adelaide who support these local researchers and

combine and compare data across the sites with their own fieldwork data which is closer to more conventional ethnography.

On the ground, these centres have been able to be far more reflexive than previously about their work, and have been able to think about and problematise concepts such as poverty and their own ideas about the potential of media technologies for social change. In the process they are able to adapt and change according to deeper understandings (or richer descriptions) of the contexts in which they work.

This is all well and good, but there is nevertheless a requirement in the wider context of development (as a business or practice) and a particular requirement of funders to demonstrate and measure change. We are working to develop EAR within what some call 'a new agenda in impact assessment' (Mayoux and Chambers 2005) for communication for development initiatives, where an ethnographic approach is seen as valuable within and alongside other approaches. With EAR, the ethnographic component is front and centre.

2. Holistic

It is a characteristic of anthropological media research that it considers media in wider contexts. An anthropological and ethnographic approach to ICTs takes us beyond the immediate contexts of access and use to a consideration of how these technologies and their various contents are embedded in quotidian lives - how users, consumers and/or producers are 'themselves imbricated in discursive universes, political situations, economic circumstances, national settings, historical moments, and transnational flows, to name only a few relevant contexts' (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod et al. 2002, pg.2).

In my work with UNESCO in particular, the notion of *communicative ecologies*, again developed with Don Slater of the LSE, has proved useful. In the research programme I just referred to we train EAR researchers to build up an understanding of local communicative ecologies. This includes

meanings, uses, functions, flows, channels, interconnections. It is based on an anthropological principle, that in order to understand one aspect of culture, you need to take an holistic approach – in this case, in order to understand one aspect of communication within a particular setting, you need to understand how it fits into the wider communicative ecology.

Communicative ecology also provided the conceptual framework for a comparative ethnographic study of the relationships between ICTs and poverty among low income groups in India, South Africa, Jamaica and Ghana (see www.isrg.info). This was a more traditional ethnographic study, based on long term fieldwork by academic researchers. Communicative ecologies focused our attention on the communication-related aspects of the contexts in which the people we were studying operate, which nevertheless were in turn imbricated in other structural, social, economic and cultural contexts.

The concept of communicative ecologies places ICTs in the context of all the ways of communicating that are significant locally, including face to face interaction. It is recognised that any ‘new’ connections and networks (social and technical) that develop as a result of the introduction of individual ICTs will be far more effective if they are somehow interconnected with existing, locally appropriate systems and structures. Access to ICTs is not enough to ensure ‘effective’ use. It is ineffective to supply new technologies (and traditional media technologies for that matter), or training in how to use them, without taking account of how they might fit into existing ‘communicative ecologies’. Through this approach we can ask how new ICTs articulate with more traditional ICTs: how do different media serve different purposes, and how do they combine in people’s everyday lives?

Each community is complex, and each media initiative, event and relationship will change and shift the power relations at both individual and community level. The concept of communicative ecologies, and EAR as a research and project development methodology, takes this into account in my work with UNESCO and UNDP, working to build research cultures in each

communication initiative so that they can adapt and respond to changing environments, changing needs and opportunities as they present themselves.

3. Application and making media

Working as I do in collaboration with (and with funding from) organisations like UNESCO and UNDP, there are clearly applied aspects to my work.

In communication for development initiatives there are complex interrelationships between social and technological networks, and issues of access versus effective use or engagement (Warschauer 2003). On the one hand, the fierce promotion of new ICTs for development, based as much on their promise as practical demonstrations of effectiveness, has undoubtedly led to many innovative experiments - as Robert Chamber's says 'rhetoric opens doors, makes spaces, and provides points of leverage' (Chambers 1998, p.285). On the other hand Article 19 wants us to 'challenge an international community that boldly offers theoretical solutions without considering and investing in the grassroots… process.' (Article19 2005, p.2). A gap exists between technology and development (which is a more fitting focus of our attention that digital divides between developed and developing countries).

UNESCO advocates the concept of 'knowledge societies' which are 'about capabilities to identify, produce, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development' (UNESCO 2005, p.191). The concept of knowledge societies as promoted by UNESCO encompasses plurality, inclusion, solidarity and participation and is based on certain principles, including freedom of expression and the universal access to information and knowledge.

But, when many of those we wish to include in knowledge societies do not have access or effective use - how do you integrate new ICTs into communities? Does effective integration mean more than simply providing training in computing and allowing people to use the internet to access information from elsewhere? If so, can they be integrated in ways that

prioritise local content creation (at the community level)? Can they be used to enable people to find their voice and, importantly, to be heard?

Despite the interactive potential of new media technologies, dominant configurations tend to follow a broadcast model of one to many. Interactivity is rarely explored innovatively and two way flows of information are rarely promoted. We cannot assume that access to information delivered via new technologies equates to effective use – delivery of information does not mean that people are thereby informed in any meaningful way. Integration of ICTs into communities and people's engagement with those ICTs requires the development of a new media literacy if the objective is to provide not only access, but the ability to analyse, critically evaluate and use ICTs and the information and knowledge it can carry, along with the ability to create content (Livingstone 2004).

Ordinary citizens, in developed and developing country contexts are generally positioned as receivers of mediated messages rather than producers. New media technologies have the potential to be interactive rather than one to many and can combine producer and receiver roles rather than separate them. This is particularly interesting in relation to questions of engagement, self-representation and social, political and cultural participation. The idea that new technologies can enable new forms of what Jean Burgess calls 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess 2006a) through the use of computers, software and peripherals - such as digital cameras - apparently places everyone with access to these technologies in the position of a potential producer. What happens when those whom we target in poverty reduction and development programmes are able to use technology to express themselves? What is the potential of this for advocacy and social change? Does this constitute a positive movement towards the development of knowledge societies? These are all questions I am currently exploring through an Australian Research Council, UNESCO and UNDP funded research project called Finding a Voice. What happens when people make their own media content – what does it say about their world view, and how does it affect people who are largely disengaged and voiceless?

These are the kinds of activities that I am undertaking and the kind of issues I am addressing. To return to the questions I posed at the beginning of this paper, does this make me, in practice, an anthropologist? And, does it matter?

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